



Make the right choice

Vehicle safety advice
for older drivers





Why is it important to buy a safe car?

Older drivers are the most likely of all driver age groups to sustain serious or life threatening injuries in a crash.

As we age:

- it takes less force to cause tissue damage and fractures
- pre-existing health conditions tend to increase the level of injuries sustained
- people are less able to recover from injuries, resulting in more complications, longer hospital stays and more rehabilitation.

It is particularly important for older people to put safety first when choosing a car. There are lots of features now available in cars to help keep you safe in a crash or even avoid it altogether.



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What makes a safer car?

Some cars are better designed and have more safety features than others. So, what should you look for when buying a new or used car?

Star rating

In Australia, there are programs that rate both new and used cars for their safety.

The **Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP)** crash tests new vehicles and provides information on the level of safety the car offers in a crash while also considering the presence of crash avoidance features.

The **Used Car Safety Ratings (UCSR)** program provides safety comparisons of used cars based on statistics collected from real world crashes in Australia and New Zealand.

In both programs, the more stars a car is awarded, the better it will perform in a crash.

“Always try to purchase a car with a 5 star rating.”



What makes a safer car?

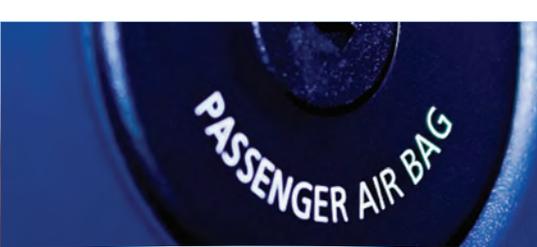
Safety for others

As well as offering good protection to the driver and passengers it is important that your vehicle offers good protection to other road users including pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists.

Both ANCAP and UCSR reserve their top scores for vehicles that are able to protect vulnerable road users as well as the vehicle's occupants.

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“Check [howsafeisyourcar.com.au](https://www.howsafeisyourcar.com.au) for more information on what features your car might have.”



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The newer the better

The latest safety technology generally makes newer cars safer than older cars. This is because the latest safety technology is designed to meet strict occupant protection regulations.

Newer cars have better structural designs, including energy absorbing crumple zones and multiple airbags that protect the occupants in a crash.

They also have many other safety features that are designed to prevent a crash happening in the first place.

Not all new cars are as safe as each other, so as well as choosing a car that scores 5 stars in crash testing, also choose one with more safety features. Some new cars may not have safety features included as standard, but they may be available as part of an optional safety pack.

Size does matter

Generally, larger cars are safer than smaller ones. This is because larger cars offer more protection in the event of a crash as they have a greater capacity to absorb the crash force. So try to purchase as large a car as you can afford and feel comfortable driving.



What to consider when buying a vehicle

Standard features

Seatbelts

Wearing a seatbelt is one of the simplest and most effective ways of protecting yourself as a driver or passenger in a car. Seatbelt features can reduce the likelihood of injury so it is important that they are worn at all times when driving. Most newer vehicles have seatbelt warning systems that will remind you if seatbelts have not been fastened. It is also important to use the adjustable upper anchorage points to ensure the seatbelt sits across the middle of the shoulder rather than on the neck.

Electronic Stability Control (ESC)

ESC is a lifesaving technology that can prevent crashes by helping drivers keep control of their car in emergency situations particularly when conditions are slippery. It is standard on all new cars registered in Victoria from 2011 onwards. ESC may also be an optional feature on pre-2011 cars.



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Airbags

In crashes, older people are more susceptible to chest and rib damage than younger people, making airbags particularly important. While frontal airbags have long been fitted to all new passenger vehicles, there are other types of airbags that may not be offered as standard.

Curtain Airbags can protect your head in a rollover crash by forming a cushion between the vehicle occupant and the window.

Head/Thorax airbags deploy from the seat and protect both the body and the head in a side impact.

Driver knee airbags are designed to protect the knees of the driver in the event of a serious collision.

Several cars now have inflatable seatbelts which inflate during a crash to provide increased head support and spread seatbelt loading to occupants.

There are also other types of airbags such as *rear seat frontal airbags* or *rear seat thorax airbags* that are becoming available.



What to consider when buying a vehicle

Newer features

A car with a 5 star ANCAP safety rating will generally have important safety features as standard, such as electronic stability control (ESC) and curtain airbags.

Even though these are great features, vehicle safety technology continues to improve every year. Here are some other technologies that you should also look for to help prevent or reduce the severity of a crash.

Autonomous Emergency Braking (AEB)

AEB enables a car to brake without any intervention by the driver if an obstacle is detected in its path. It can be particularly helpful for people whose reaction times may be slower than they used to be. AEB can also be useful in those rare situations where there is not enough time to react (e.g. the sudden braking in front of a child running out after a ball), if there is bad lighting, or if a driver is temporarily distracted.



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Reversing Visibility Camera/Sensor

These systems use either a camera or sensor to detect objects behind a reversing vehicle. More advanced systems have side cameras to provide a 360 degree view. If you have reduced flexibility, a reversing camera will help you see objects when reversing. RACV has developed a Reversing Visibility Index to help motorists compare a variety of popular makes and models of cars in relation to their rearward visibility. The results can be found at racv.com.au/reversing

Blind Spot Warning

Blind Spot Warning helps the driver to change lanes safely by detecting whether there are other vehicles in the driver's 'blind spot'. Although there is no substitute for performing a head check, these systems will help you detect objects in your blind spot if you have reduced flexibility. The system will usually warn the driver of the presence of other vehicles by a light on the side mirror. If the driver proceeds to change lanes, the system will further warn the driver with an audible alert or steering wheel vibration.



What to consider when buying a vehicle

Newer features

Lane Departure Warning

Lane Departure Warning technology monitors the position of a vehicle in a lane and warns the driver when the vehicle begins to deviate, so that corrective action can be taken. More advanced systems can also correct risky manoeuvres autonomously.

Emergency Brake Assist (EBA)

EBA detects when emergency braking is required and automatically increases brake pressure to stop the vehicle sooner.



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Other things to check before you buy

- **Good visibility** is imperative. Choose a car with good visibility through the front, side and rear windows and through mirrors. Check that mirrors can be adjusted from the driver's seat to maximise visibility.
- **Instrument displays** should be easy to read and the controls large enough for the driver to operate easily.
- **Check the ease and range of seat adjustment** – It is imperative that you are comfortable in the car since this can help reduce fatigue. Check that the seat is high enough to give you good visibility through the front windscreen and allow easy access to all the main foot operated and dashboard controls. Ensure it is easy for the driver and passengers to get in and out of the front and rear seats.
- **The steering column should be adjustable** for height and reach and should not obstruct your view of the dashboard displays.
- **Boot storage space** is easier to access in vehicles with a hatch rear opening as this allows items to be placed/removed into the storage compartment without as much lifting.



Some common myths

X **Myth – Airbags injure people.**

✓ **Fact -** Australian research clearly demonstrates that airbags significantly improve occupant safety. It is important to realise that airbags inflate rapidly and then immediately deflate; there is no risk of occupants being suffocated or trapped. Airbags are also designed only to deploy if absolutely necessary.

X **Myth – They don't build cars like they used to!**

✓ **Fact -** They build them much better! A safe car absorbs as much of the energy of the crash as possible, reducing the impact on occupants. This is achieved through crumple zones built into modern cars. Older cars do not offer as much impact absorption, which puts occupants at greater risk. In addition, airbag and restraint systems in modern cars reduce the likelihood and severity of injuries from collisions.



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-  **Myth – Safety technologies are only beneficial for bad drivers.**
-  **Fact -** A vehicle fitted with the latest technologies will detect and react more quickly to an emergency situation than even the most skilled racing driver could. Studies have indicated technologies such as ESC and AEB reduce the likelihood of crashes by about a third.
-  **Myth – 5-star cars are only a little bit safer than 4-star cars.**
-  **Fact -** A 5-star ANCAP rated car receives the highest rating for head and neck, upper leg and driver chest assessment. While a 4-star rated car also receives the same result for a head and neck injury, the concern with 4-star rated cars is that they show a moderate risk of injury to the driver and passenger's chest including the upper and lower right leg of the driver. This means vehicle occupants are more susceptible to serious or life threatening injury in a 4-star rated car when compared to a 5-star rated car. Older drivers are generally more susceptible to injury because of increased frailty, so buying a 5-star car is particularly important.



Vehicle aids and adaptations

Drivers and passengers with physical limitations might benefit from vehicle aids and adaptations. These devices can make vehicles safer and easier to use. Obtaining an individual assessment and expert advice from an occupational therapist is important to make informed choices.

Products are available to help with getting into/out of the car, sitting comfortably, applying seatbelts, gripping the steering wheel, using pedals and mirrors, and transporting mobility devices such as wheelchairs.

Some devices and modifications may impact upon vehicle registration and driver licensing requirements – expert advice is recommended.

RACV's *Keeping Mobile – Vehicle Modifications for Drivers and Passengers with a Disability* brochure provides further information about vehicle aids and adaptations.

Free information is also available by calling the Independent Living Centre - 1300 885 886



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Where to get more information

When selecting a new or used vehicle it is valuable to check the safety ratings of the vehicle from crash test results. Safety rating information is available from racv.com.au/carsafety or by phoning the RACV Motoring Advice line on **03 9790 2190**.

Other useful resources

- RoyalAuto feature articles on the safety of new and used cars
royalauto.com.au
- RACV website - has safety rating information, as well as information on vehicles and road test reports
racv.com.au/carsafety
- TAC car safety website - provides the latest safety information on a range of vehicles
howsafeisyourcar.com.au
- Independent Living Centre - offers a free advisory service
03 9362 6111 or 1300 885 886
ilcaustralia.org.au



Vehicle safety features checklist

If you are buying a car, the following checklist might be helpful:

- Airbags – driver, passenger, side and curtain
- Electronic Stability Control
- 5 star safety rating
- Autonomous Emergency Braking
- Newest car you can afford
- Largest car you are comfortable with
- Accessible controls
- Legible displays
- Good driver visibility
- Good turning circle
- Adjustable seating position, steering wheel, and seatbelt height
- Cargo space that is easy to access